

# LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



## Majestic Building and Theater

22 West Monroe Street

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in April 2004

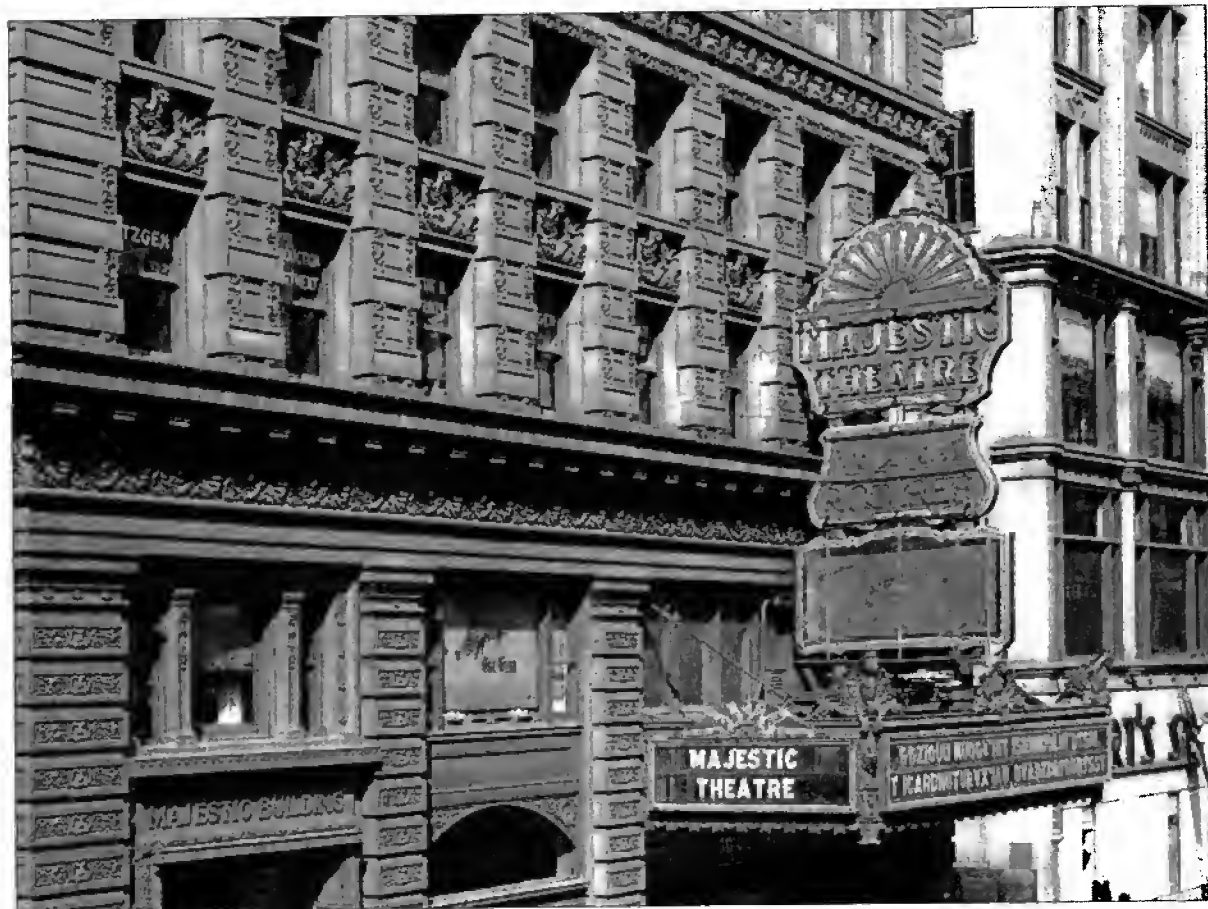


**CITY OF CHICAGO**

Richard M. Daley, Mayor

**Department of Planning and Development**

Denise M. Casalino, P.E., Commissioner



The Majestic marquee, circa 1930. Over time, the theater's marquee has undergone several changes. The original marquee, with the additions of lights, lower trim and an ornate blade, appears in this photograph.

Cover: Current photo of the Majestic Building and Theater with details of the cornice and theater auditorium interior.

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This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

## Majestic Building and Theater

22 West Monroe Street

Date: 1906

Architect: Edmund R. Krause

The Majestic Building and Theater is one of Chicago's handsomest Classical-style office buildings and a monument to Chicago's significant theater history as one of the city's oldest legitimate theaters. As the most important building by Chicago architect Edmund Krause, the Majestic Building's ornate French Renaissance-style façade is detailed with finely-crafted terra-cotta decoration based on the Classical architecture of 16th and 17th-century Renaissance France. The theater (originally named the Majestic Theater, and renamed the Shubert Theater after World War II), with its beautifully designed and opulent lobbies and theater, is one of Chicago's most attractive surviving early theaters. The combination of theater and office building into one structure reflected Chicago's burgeoning urbanism and the need to adeptly utilize expensive real estate in Chicago's Loop area through the development of multi-use buildings.

The theater is significant in Chicago's theater history for its century-long presentation of theatrical entertainments including vaudeville, musicals, and plays. As the Majestic, it was conceived as Chicago's premier venue for quality vaudeville entertainment for middle-class patrons. As vaudeville faded in popularity in the 1920s and 30s, the Majestic became a major stage for touring Broadway shows, dance troupes and locally based theatrical productions. After World War II, as the renamed Shubert Theater, it was an important venue for legitimate theater in the Loop, and was the only venue to remain open during the 1970s and 80s. A plethora of theatrical entertainments—including, among many events, handcuff king Harry Houdini, a 67-week run of *My Fair Lady* in the late 1950s, a year-long run of *Hair* in 1970, and Julie Andrews' appearance in the pre-Broadway run of *Victor/Victoria* in the 1990s—have played on the Majestic's stage. To this day, the Shubert Theater remains a prominent fixture in Chicago's Loop and a major stage for live theater productions.



## BUILDING CONSTRUCTION & DESCRIPTION

Commissioned by real estate investor Augusta Lehman, the Majestic Building and Theater, at 20 stories in height, was the tallest building in Chicago at the time of its completion in 1906. The building was conceived as a vaudeville theater topped by an office building, a combination of uses that reflected the expensive land values in Chicago's Loop during the early 1900s. The office building portion of the structure has street frontage of approximately 82 feet and extends to a depth of 62 feet, sitting atop a base housing the five-story, 2,008-seat theater, which extends to a depth of 192 feet. A caisson foundation system consisting of solid concrete piers supports the structure, which is rectangular in plan. Columns of rolled steel form the building's skeleton, which is clad in white terra cotta and enameled brick. Facing Monroe Street, the primary façade is clad in extremely ornate terra cotta detailed with low-relief Classical ornament derived from French Renaissance-style buildings. The secondary façades are clad in white enameled brick matching in color the primary façade. Small amounts of terra cotta, similar in detailing to that used for the primary façade, adorn and outline these more simply detailed elevations.

Divided into five main sections, the Majestic Building's façade is organized in the traditional manner of early 20th-century skyscrapers, echoing a classical column with a "base" (lower floors), "shaft" (office floors), and "capital" (top floors and cornice). The base section of the building is four stories in height and divided into two sections of two floors each. The first floor contains two main entrances; a large entrance for the theater and a less prominent one for the office building. Each entrance has large second-story transom windows above multiple doors. Originally, the two-story entrance loggia to the theater was open to the street, and the ticket office was placed in the center, near the sidewalk. Sometime before the 1940s, the loggia was enclosed and, possibly later, the ceiling was lowered to one story in height, concealing much of the entrance's detailing, including second-story pilasters with compound capitals and a bracketed, coffered ceiling.



The colonnaded gallery above the loggia, seen here, is currently obscured by a dropped ceiling.



The façade is clad in ornate terra cotta detailed with Classical ornament derived from the French Renaissance style, as shown here in two current photographs.

The entrance is sheltered by a heavy marquee bearing the theater's name (at least the third in the building's history, though built on the original structure and retaining some of its decorative detail). A third entrance at ground level, to the west of the theater, leads into a small retail space. The third- and fourth-floor façades each have eight sets of double-hung, evenly-spaced windows. These rows of windows are divided horizontally by a row of terra-cotta panels decorated with raised floral wreaths. The most ornate terra cotta appears in the four stories of the base section and features large quoins with inset flowering cartouches, intertwining wreaths, with small waves and other classical motifs.

At just four bays wide, the next sixteen floors make up the office portion of the building. Bands of terra cotta divide the Chicago-style window horizontally and vertically. Each bay section is capped with scrolling acanthus-leaf terra-cotta details. The topmost floors cap the building. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> floors also have Chicago-style windows. Terra-cotta pilasters separate each bay with terra-cotta pediments covering each set of 18th-floor windows. The top floor is again handsomely ornamented with profuse decorative terra cotta, including scrolls, classic patterning and lions' heads that cap this level. A delicate shell-motif cornice crowns the entire structure, running along the entire perimeter of the roofline, including east, west and north secondary elevations.

In this photo from 1905, the building is nearly complete, with only the marquee left to install. This view looks east down Monroe Street, towards State Street and Lake Michigan.

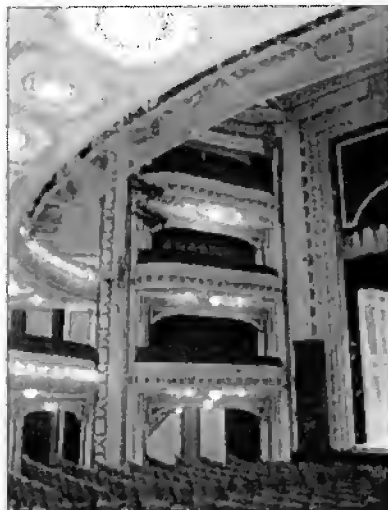


Since the building was visible from all directions, care was taken in the design to provide finishes on all elevations that, while simpler, complemented the main façade. The white enameled brick facing on the secondary elevations was chosen to be the exact same color as the terra cotta. The rusticated quoin pattern was applied at all four corners up to the top of the building shaft, with terra cotta pilasters adorning the corners of the top floors. The double-hung, single punched windows of the east and west elevations are decorated with heavy sills and keystone lintels that carry through the Renaissance influence.

The Majestic Building, with its Chicago-style windows and classically based form, shares much common ground with the Chicago School, but its stylistic elements reflect a synthesis of the French Renaissance-style exuberance with the contained, nature-inspired decorative ideas that Louis Sullivan favored. Among the late-nineteenth century eclectic architectural movements, the principles of Italian Renaissance-style design took a decided romantic turn, incorporating more highly decorative elements from the French. From a distance, the Majestic Building appears sober but stately, with rusticated lower stories and quoins, clearly articulated horizontal divisions, deeply inset windows, wide spandrels and heavily corniced upper floors. Upon closer inspection, the profusion of terra-cotta ornamentation takes over. On the lower floors, the quoins and rustications are heavily embellished. At both the lower and upper stories, the horizontal divisions (two at the lower stories and three at the upper) are ornate projecting cornices supported by consoles, each one different in design from the others, with the top of the building sporting a compound cornice of various levels. The tripartite Chicago-style windows are separated by decorative pilasters, some with projecting "portico" caps, and the wide spandrels feature various frieze designs. Upon very close inspection, the influence of Louis Sullivan becomes apparent. In particular, the enriched foliated detailing that forms a frieze at the top of the second story proclaims his influence. This design is repeated throughout the building. The various scrolled, foliated panels, friezes and spandrel designs could have been directly inspired from one of his buildings. In addition, the pilaster mullions, lintel openings and slightly projecting piers that rise continuously through the shaft of the building, with decorative emphasis on the lower and upper floors, are characteristic of Sullivan's designs.

The Majestic Building and Theater was the first theater built under strict fire safety guidelines mandated by the City of Chicago soon after the Iroquois Theater fire disaster of 1903, just three years before the opening of the Majestic Theater. This event claimed the lives of over 600 Chicagoans when sparks from a spotlight ignited the curtain and fire rapidly engulfed the barely-month old theater. Clearly marked exit





This current photograph illustrates the nearly intact condition of the opulent theater auditorium.

doors, wider aisles, scenery made of fireproof materials, and "panic bars" on exit doors are some of the fire-safety standards to arise out of this tragedy. The Majestic's terra-cotta cladding was chosen primarily for its fireproof characteristics. The building's interior was also built with fire-resistant materials. The wall cladding was backed with structural clay-tile walls and floors and partitions of fireproof materials. The building notably featured a main enclosed stairway constructed entirely of fireproof iron and marble and elevator shafts enclosed in marble for further fire protection.

The interior of the theater carries through the motifs of the exterior's French Renaissance-style décor, though much of the decoration was originally more Victorian in feeling. Mosaic tile floors of delicately scrolled foliated designs lead the theater patron from the loggia through the vestibule and into the lobby. Caramel-colored tiles form the background, with tiny tiles of various colors twining into intricate designs which are framed by wide terra cotta-colored borders. The vestibule and lobby entry doors are bronze with glass panels, set into bronze frames and surrounds with decorative leaf designs. The surrounds appear to be original, while the doors were changed from the original wood-framed doors, probably very early. An original white marble wainscot trims the loggia, except at the east wall where alterations were made circa 1933 to move the ticket office from the center of the loggia. Inside the vestibule, an original marble staircase leads up to the mezzanine level. Above the open entry to the staircase, a bronze sign indicating the mezzanine is embellished with dramatic masks matching those on the bronze plaques at the entrance to the loggia. Inside the vestibule and lobby, the walls are covered white marble trimmed with marble wall moldings and carved base trim, and corner pilasters with compound capitals. Marble balustrades beneath arches on either side of the lobby demarcate stairs leading down to the lower level. Inspection of the marble and comparison with historic photos



Abundant interior details that have been preserved include light fixtures, left, and the Sullivan-inspired panels of the ladies' lounge, right.

indicates that some of this is not original. While the lobby was probably originally faced with marble walls, much of the existing molded wall panels and the arches and balustrades at the staircases are not original, and may have been added in the 1940's when the Shubert brothers reopened the theater. The ornate ceilings, however, are original. Compound plaster moldings of egg-and-dart, beading, and acanthus leaf designs are set between rows of incandescent theater bulbs.

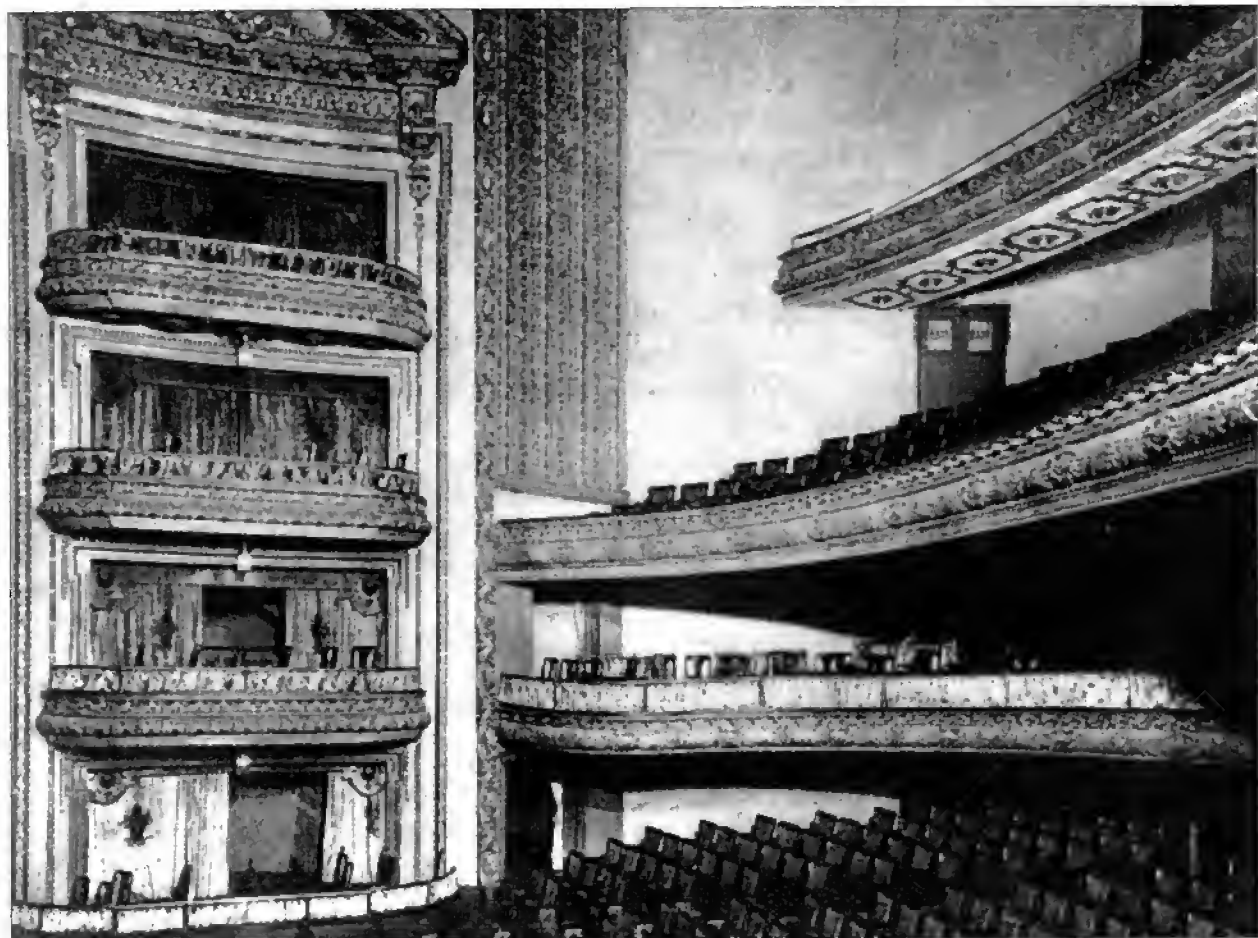
One historic account indicates that the lobby and foyer were originally finished with mahogany trim, which was replaced within a few years of completion with more ornate embellishments of marble and bronze. This was considered necessary to be in keeping with the high quality of the entertainment, as well as the trend for more elaborate and fanciful theater design. This early change is particularly evident in the long, narrow foyer leading to the five theater aisles. Historic photos show the space trimmed with mahogany, having wooden staircases up to the loge, and a simpler ceiling. The existing marble wainscot, door surrounds, trim, stairs and elaborate ceiling appear to have been a significant part of an early alteration. The wainscot is designed of two types of marble—soft, rosy marble panels trimmed with white. White marble also trims the five entrances into the theater aisles, which are crowned with elaborate arched pediments with cartouches. The marble staircases at both the east and west ends have turned balustrades, with scrolling foliage railings at the landings. This dramatic two-story space has a heavily bracketed and coved ceiling, all part of the early alteration except for the extant geometric flat moldings.

Twin marble staircases descend from the theater lobby through arches on either side to men's and ladies' restrooms and lounges in the building's lower level. Between the lounges is an original decorative fireplace with a heavily ornamented mantel, gilded in French Rococo style. The ladies' lounge retains most of its original detailing, including a wainscot comprised of carved Sullivan-esque-style decorative panels. In the southeast corner of the room is the original phone booth, faced with the same wainscot and trim. It is said to be the first such phone booth in the city. The carved cornice moldings surrounding the room appear to have been influenced by the designs of the Scotsman Charles Rennie MacIntosh. The ceiling medallions are of similar, unusual design. The sconces and ceiling light fixtures in the room have been replaced, but reflect the Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Across the hall the men's lounge, with a nautical theme, has been more considerably altered.

On the east elevation off the alley set (about twenty-five feet back from the street) is the entrance that served African-American patrons of the Majestic Theater at the time of the building's completion. The entrance led to a separate interior staircase parallel to the main staircase, which led up to the upper-most gallery. This entrance and portions of the staircase are still extant.



This 1906 photo illustrates the original Victorian plaster ceiling ornamentation and mahogany trim of the theater's foyer. Velvet drapery frames door openings and the theater's extensive art collection, which hung in the foyer and in the upper story of the loggia. Within a few years of construction, major additions of marble wainscoting, stair case, and floors were added along with chandeliers and baroque ceiling surrounds to make the foyer much more elaborate.



The Majestic theater interior, c. 1906. The theater's opulent interior was applauded as one of Chicago's most elaborate theater spaces when it opened on New Year's Day, 1906. It remains largely intact to this day.

The theater auditorium, which has had very little alteration, continues the theme of gilded and foliated finishes. Currently seating about 2,000 patrons, the main floor seating rises gently from the stage and its squared-arched proscenium. Framing the proscenium is a compound molding, carved with shells and foliate designs. Slanting out from each side of the stage, four tiers of boxes are set within an ornate frame composed of bands of molding topped with an immense broken pediment set atop a frieze and decorated with swags and wreaths. Originally, there was a box at the first floor level set within this frame, but it has been removed and replaced with additional house seating. The curving faces of the boxes consist of bands of scrolling foliated trim alternating with geometric patterns. The transition between the boxes and the balconies is accentuated on the side walls with an additional "frame" composed of rows of flat geometric ornament, about seven feet wide in total. The balconies curve gracefully around the house. The mezzanine level seating is pulled back, sheltered underneath the deep third-floor balcony. The upper-level balcony again pulls back, and top-level gallery seats are even further back. The curving faces of the

mezzanine, third and upper balcony levels are heavily embellished with bands of foliated trim. The undersides of the balconies feature medallions and alternating bands of organic and geometric pattern. All of this ornament appears to be original, though most original lighting fixtures have been replaced. The staircases on either side of the house leading up to the boxes are also original, of wood and steel construction with decorative risers and carved brackets on the underside. The balustrades are original bronze openwork, with wood handrails.

The high-class amenities of the theater's auditorium were paired with high-quality office space. The office tower portion of the building was built so that all offices would benefit from natural light. Exceptionally large and closely spaced Chicago-style windows also served to maximize natural light within office spaces. Each floor plate varied to suit tenants' specific office desires. Each floor's elevators and corridors were originally decorated with seven-foot-high marble wainscoting trimmed with mahogany and 10-1/2-foot ceilings. High-speed elevators with twenty-four hour service, including Sundays, and toilet rooms with cloth towels were just two of the amenities available to office tenants. The Monroe Street location had the advantage of being relatively quiet while still being located in the bustling Loop area, with streetcar lines conveniently nearby, but not directly—and noisily—in front of the building.

Left: The ornate details of the current foyer illustrate the alterations that were made within a few years of construction, in order to upgrade the interior finishes.

Below: Detail of the moldings that embellish the boxes, looking through to the bronze staircase railing.



*This current photograph of the façade illustrates how the Chicago-style windows were integrated into highly decorative details.*



As the second largest theater community in the United States, Chicago contains a wealth of theaters, with the greatest concentration built in Chicago's downtown during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Built in 1906, the Majestic is the second oldest extant theater in this area, superceded in age only by the Auditorium Theater, built in 1889. Joining these two are later theaters built in the 1920s, including the Chicago Theater (1921), the Oriental Theater (1926), Civic Opera House (1929) and the Goodman Theater (1922, 2000) as Chicago's predominant downtown entertainment venues. Built by such firms as Adler & Sullivan and Rapp & Rapp, the Loop theaters are among the most visited and readily recognized landmarks in Chicago. Today, just as when the Majestic opened a century ago, Chicago's large theaters provide a variety of entertainment, with something suiting nearly everyone.

As theater industry became a large, competitive business, the structures themselves became increasingly more elaborate cultural monuments. As much as the theater productions themselves, the theater buildings were meant to create awe in the minds of viewers. As theater architecture developed over time, structures became more imaginative and palatial. It was not uncommon for Chicago theaters to feature elaborate wall murals, fountains, elaborate furniture and décor that were meant to transport patrons to another reality just as readily as the entertainment they were to see. Vaudeville and motion picture theaters were especially prone to imaginative and elaborate decors. Seeking to legitimize these arts to the level already established by legitimate theater, elaborate and palatial architecture became the way to establish a theater's reputation. The Majestic's elaborate French Renaissance-style terra cotta façade and ornate interior spaces are fine examples of this practice.



*Above: The most elaborate terra cotta ornament of the building is on the cornice, with wreaths, dentils, multiple moldings, and lions' heads all surmounted by an anthemion crest.*



*Left: The classical tripartite façade design of base, shaft and capital is evident in this current photograph. Continuous projecting piers emphasize the height and draw the eye up toward the cornice.*

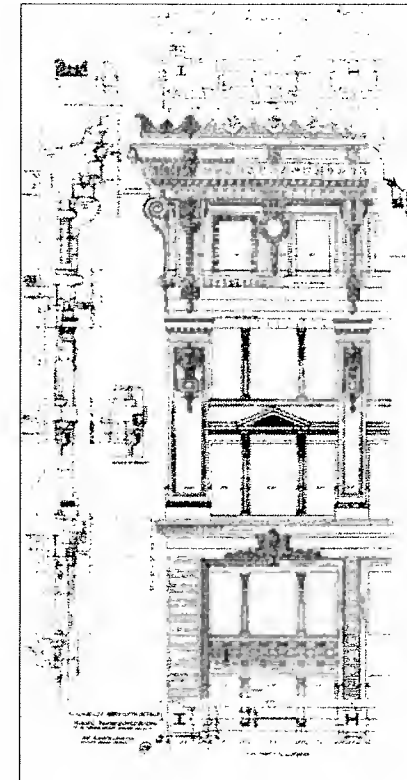
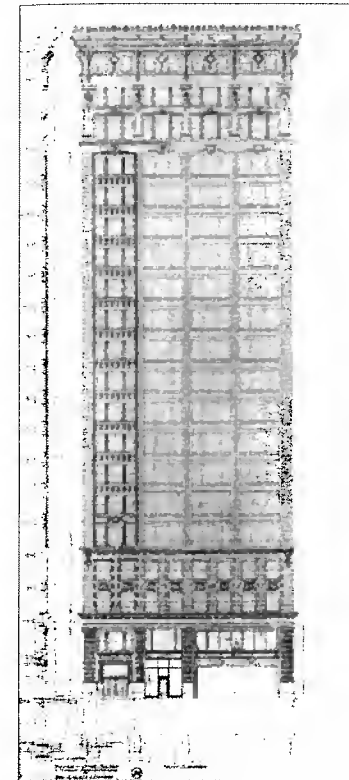
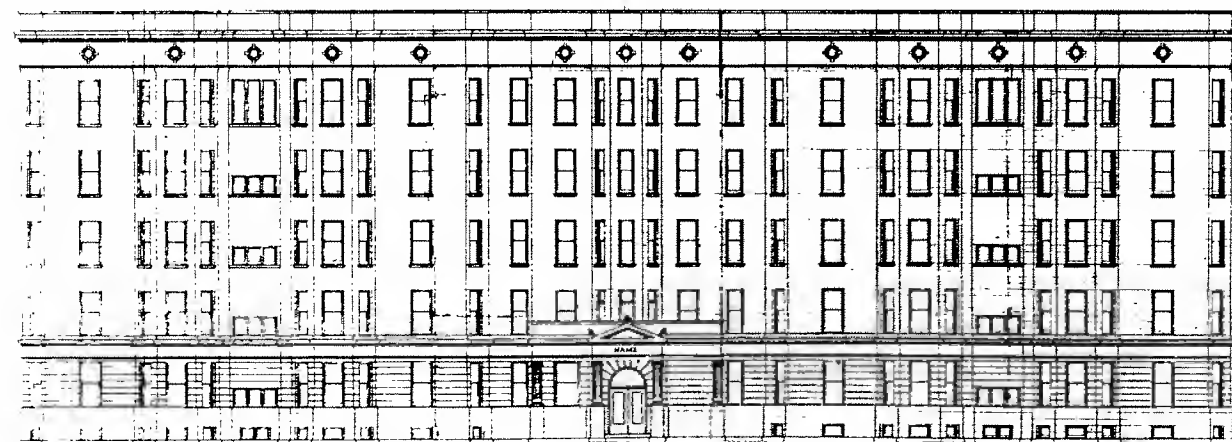
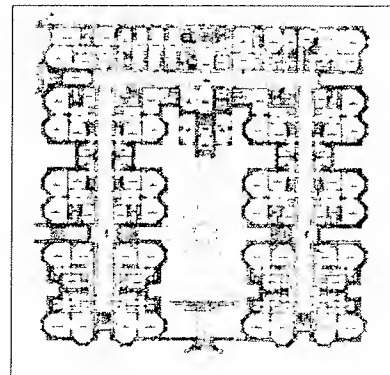


## ARCHITECT EDMUND R. KRAUSE

Edmund R. Krause, the architect of the Majestic Building and Theater, was born in 1859 in Germany and was trained as an architect there. He came to Chicago in 1885 and set up architectural practice. Krause's existing buildings in Chicago illustrate the architect's deft competence at architectural styles and his ability to successfully employ them on a variety of structures, generally emphasizing form and geometry over excessive decoration.

Krause designed hotels, commercial structures, apartment buildings and single-family residences, including his own house. Built in 1885 and located at 3260 N. Kenmore in Lincoln Park, Krause's residence was a playful variation on the classic Chicago three-flat. A steeply-pitched roof covered the building's front section and included dormer windows and a very tall chimney. The arched Italianate-style windows, classical string-courses and quoins create an unusual dimensional front to the three flat, giving an air of a stately European summer residence to this common architectural form. He also designed the Jacob Gross House (1892, 632 W. Deming), a simplified version of the Queen Anne style. Other noteworthy Krause designs include the Classical Revival-style Greenbrier apartment building (1904) and the Lessing Annex apartment building, (also known as the Commodore, 1897), which are located across from each other at the corner of Surf and Broadway in the Lakeview neighborhood, and were also commissioned by the Lehmanns. The Lessing apartment building has been credited with being the earliest large "suburban style" courtyard apartment building in the city. From 1892, the apartment building at 1500 North LaSalle anticipates the form of the Commodore with its use of bays to bring light and ventilation to the interior as well as a pleasing rhythm to the façade. Krause's office building, the Lightner Building at 1006-1012 South

The Majestic's architect, Edmund R. Krause, was known for his residential buildings. The Lessing Annex apartment building, 1897-99, was known as one of the earliest suburban-type courtyard buildings in the city.



Architect Edmund Krause's 1904 plans for the yet to be named Majestic Theater. The Drawings clearly illustrate the structure's profusion of highly ornate classical and beaux-art decorative motifs.

Michigan (1904), like the Majestic, features Chicago windows with large amounts of glass, though in this building the columns and beams are minimally rendered.

The Majestic Building and Theater was one of Krause's largest commissions and his only known theater. Krause employed an assistant designer, George Rapp, who was to achieve great fame as a theater designer in the next decades. In 1906, after the completion of the Majestic Building and Theater, George joined his brother, C.W., and formed the architectural firm of Rapp & Rapp. C.W. had been taking small commissions and designing smaller vaudeville houses before joining his brother. For the next decade, the brothers primarily designed smaller theaters. Balaban & Katz awarded the brothers their first large commission in 1916 for the 2400-seat Central Park Theater at 3531 W. Roosevelt Road. They were to become the favored architects of the Chicago-based Balaban & Katz theater firm and were awarded important commissions throughout the country, including the Loop's Oriental and Chicago Theaters (1925, 1920), the Uptown Theater (1924) and the Riviera Theater (1917), also located in the city.

Rapp & Rapp were famed for their themed architecture interiors, including imaginative theme lounges. The first trace of such interiors appears in the Majestic Theater's opulent Art Nouveau-style ladies' lounge.



The imaginative ladies' lounge, 1906, features one of the first telephone booths in the city integrated into its wealth of Art Nouveau and Sullivan-esque ornament. George Rapp, assistant to architect Edmund Krause, may have designed this lounge, which is reminiscent of the themed theaters and movies palaces George later designed with his brother, C.W., as partners in the firm Rapp & Rapp.



A postcard of the Majestic Building, circa 1910. At the time of its construction, the combination theater building and office tower was the tallest skyscraper in Chicago.



## BUILDING HISTORY

The Majestic Building was commissioned by Augusta Lehmann, widow of Ernst J. Lehmann and one of the largest real estate holders in the city at the time. Ernst Lehmann, founder of The Fair department store, had died in 1900. Mrs. Lehmann administered her husband's interest in the company until the year she commissioned the Majestic Building. She then bought out her partner and gave the company to her sons, continuing to act as vice president. Her partner in the Majestic Building was Charles E. Kohl and the building was originally the home of the Monroe Theater Company, which Kohl directed. The Kohl-Castle Company, a group of theater promoters and agents, also managed Chicago's (Civic) Opera House, Olympic and Haymarket Theaters. Theater troupes and acts traveled throughout the country to perform, making it common for theater entrepreneurs to have numerous theater holdings and form partnerships with other theaters to host these traveling acts. This practice allowed a great diversity of acts to appear upon a theater's stage. Chicago itself was one of the largest hubs for traveling theater acts of all types, ranging from Broadway dramas to song-and-dance duos, and the Majestic Theater soon became one of the most well-respected vaudeville theaters in the country.

Opening on New Year's Day, 1906, the Majestic Building and its associated Majestic Theater (as it was known at the time) immediately became part of Chicago's rich theater history. The city's first legitimate theatrical engagement had taken place nearly seventy years before in 1837 at the Sauganash Hotel, one of the frontier town's earliest and most significant gathering places. (Although long demolished, the site of the Sauganash Hotel was designated a Chicago Landmark in 2002.) In 1841, the Rice Theater opened as the first permanent structure specifically built for theater and attracted traveling stage acts from around the country. In the last half of the nineteenth century, Chicago's theater scene would grow to include nearly every form of dramatic entertainment and stage act available. After the Great Fire in 1871, theater architecture in Chicago turned from simple theaters to elaborate palaces. The McVicker's, Auditorium (1889) and Garrick (Schiller) Theaters (1892) became hallmarks of theater construction and cultural treasures of the city of Chicago. The French Renaissance style and lavish bronze, mosaic and marble-clad interiors of the Majestic Building and theater make it one of the most elaborate of Chicago's theater buildings.

As Chicago established itself with dramatic theater productions traveling from eastern cities to early theaters such as the Rice Theater, more dedicated theaters began to flourish in the city, featuring varied forms of theatrical entertainment including comedies, dramatic plays, and operas. The Majestic was the first to offer "greater" vaudeville appearing at its most elegant, providing another level of diversity to the Chicago theater community. At the Majestic, greater vaudeville lived up to its name not only in the setting within which it was presented but in the acts that performed on its stage.

An early brochure on the theater reads,

*The theater is confessedly on the top of the line of perfection—there is nothing better in the world. With this perfect environment to begin with, and stage appliances of unexampled utility and beauty, it only remains to supply a stage entertainment of artistic quality and wide range to round out an offering which deserves the title of Vaudeville de Luxe. There are admirable programs elsewhere in the United States, but nowhere else is strictly high class vaudeville for men, women and children offered in such a splendid theater. The old taint of cheap variety long since disappeared from the high class vaudeville theatres, and the Majestic has broken down all prejudice by the uniform excellence and elegance of its offerings.*



The Majestic Building, 1964. This Hedrich-Blessing photograph illustrates the structure's presence as one of the most ornate examples of a Chicago School skyscraper. The marquee in this photograph was installed by the Shubert Brothers during 1946 renovations.

A few of the great names to appear on the Majestic's stage in its early days were the famous escape artist Harry Houdini, Will Rogers, actors Eddie Foy, Fanny Brice, Lily Langtry and Lillian Russell along with the Marx Brothers and actress Sarah Bernhardt with her troupe. Acts ranging from Houdini—freeing himself after having representatives of the Chicago Police Department handcuff him—to great stage actors of the day such as Sarah Bernhardt, performing scenes from their most famous plays, made the Majestic Theater's elegant stage the venue for entertainment superstars in the early decades of the 20th century. The only constant player in the theater's early years were selections projected with the Kinodrome, an early cinematic projection system invented by Thomas Edison.

The Majestic Building's combination of theater and office space followed a practice in theater building introduced to Chicago by Adler and Sullivan in their Auditorium Building of 1889, and continued with the Garrick. As with these earlier buildings, the Majestic Building contained both a theater and office space. The economically practical combination of a theater with offices lessened the financial risk of building a stand-alone theater. Economic viability was especially important at the turn of the century, when the theater business had become viciously competitive and escalating real estate prices in the urban environment of Chicago's Loop made any property investment a substantial one.

The beginning of a new century experienced an unprecedented boom in theater building. In New York and Chicago, dozens of theaters were being built each year, creating a very competitive market. To succeed in the business, theaters became increasingly more elaborate, and thus more expensive, structures. Combined with rising real estate costs in these growing urban settings, the risk of building a theater was offset by pairing it with rentable space that would supply a steady source of income. Large urban theaters were often combined with offices or hotels, while smaller theaters often housed retail space on their ground floors to help make the structures more profitable. The Majestic Building's downtown location in Chicago's Loop made it a perfect candidate to combine with both an office tower and a small amount of retail space.

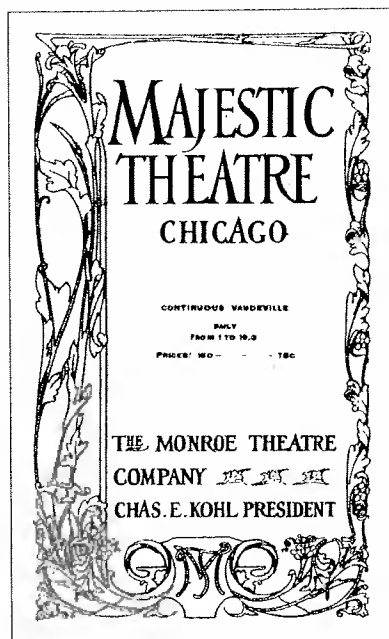
The Majestic was home to such tenants as the National Real Estate Board, Bostonian Shoes and the Western Vaudeville Managers' Association. The commercial and theater aspects of the Majestic benefited from a symbiotic relationship. The Western Vaudeville Managers' Association, which worked intimately with vaudeville acts performing on stages throughout the Midwest and Canada, had an ideal location to observe the trade in practice. The office/theater combination afforded this group the opportunity to use the Majestic Theater as a laboratory

and model by which vaudeville standards would be set. The theater had the benefit of management nearby; nearly guaranteeing it would be run to the highest of standards. The Majestic's solid reputation as a high-class vaudeville theater undoubtedly benefited from having its guardian organization nearby. This relationship is not unlike that of the Auditorium Theater, whose patrons could make use of its hotel and dining room, which were contained in the same structure as the theater. Based on these early examples, the combined building has become the rule in building large, urban structures.

The design of the building reflected the Majestic's commitment to produce only the highest quality entertainment. With its French Renaissance-style décor and elaborate terra-cotta façade, the Majestic projected an image of class and civility. The foyer to the auditorium originally contained an art collection described as "second only to that of the Art Institute of Chicago" in the Midwest. The Majestic Theater employed an army of impeccably uniformed ushers and attendants that kept the theater at a model level of cleanliness and provided for every need, including assisting women attending performances in the theater without their maids in the well-appointed Ladies' Rest Room.

As mounting competition drove dramatic or "legitimate" theater ticket prices out of the reach of most middle class pocketbooks, Kohl-Castle capitalized on the opportunity to provide more affordable entertainment in the form of vaudeville. In the last two decades of the 1800's, vaudeville in the United States had developed a reputation as being a "seedy" form of entertainment. "Saloon" vaudeville was characterized as being a male form of entertainment, taking place in smoky concert saloons with scantily clad waitresses. The acts were often characterized as rude and profane. Reputable vaudeville theaters were constantly fighting this image and had to exert special effort in order to depict their theaters as clean, reputable places of entertainment. Under the watchful eye of the Western Vaudeville Managers' Association, the Majestic boosted "greater" vaudeville's reputation. It followed the European vaudeville model, where this theater form was performed on the same stages as dramatic theater. An early Majestic Theater brochure reads

*The best artists of the world are always available, and years of experience enable the management to discriminate, select and arrange programs with reference to a harmonious and entertaining whole. Recreation is the purpose. The object of the management is to entertain and make people happy. It offers no tragedies to depress and no problem plays to disgust.*



This early program indicates the affordable nature of vaudeville performances at the Majestic Theater. Under the direction of Charles Kohl, a high-class variety of continuous vaudeville featured ten acts who played in two rotations from 1:00 to 10:30 p.m. each day. This flexible form of entertainment drew an audience of middle-class customers and suburban shoppers and tourists. It was also a popular form of diversion before attending a dramatic theater production or musical performance elsewhere in the city.

With the 1906 prices of vaudeville tickets ranging from 15 cents to 75 cents, tickets were affordable to almost all and it became a popular form of middle-class entertainment, also for Chicago's African-Americans. In the mid-19th century, thousands of African-Americans were moving north to work in Chicago's industries, and settling on the city's Near South Side. By the late 1800s this had become known as the "Black Belt," and evolved into a completely separate society with an independent commercial, social and political base. By 1900, the population of 30,000 had developed its own financial and cultural institutions, including Jazz Clubs and theaters. The Pekin Theater, which opened on south State Street in 1905, was the first full-scale, African-American-owned and operated theater in Chicago, offering a venue mostly for music.

One result of this segregated "parallel society" was the lack of smooth integration of African-Americans into the social and cultural life of the central city. The Majestic Theater reflected this situation with its design of a separate entrance off the alley as the only entrance for African-Americans. African-American patrons entered the building by ascending a few steep steps to a back door on a concrete landing. Through this simple back door, they entered a separated, parallel staircase that led them to a fifth-floor gallery where they could be seated to watch the performances. This entrance and staircase still remain, though the staircase has been closed off with infill flooring at the second floor level.

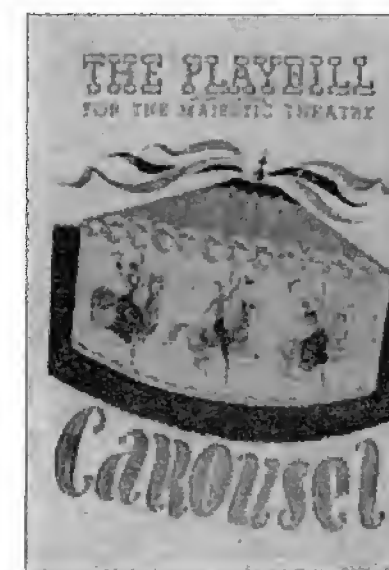
Vaudeville featured a variety of acts, including orchestras, song and dance teams, magicians, acrobats and the presentation of dramatic scenes from well-known plays. Vaudeville acts traveled like other theater acts, on circuits which played in various towns and cities throughout the year, usually booked at a theater for two-week runs. At the Majestic Theater, around a dozen acts performed twice each day, in a run beginning at 1:00 p.m. and ending at 10:30 in the evening. Theater patrons were allowed to enter and exit the theater space when they wished, and could stay as long as they liked. The Majestic's location in the bustling retail district of the Loop made this form of entertainment ideal; shoppers needing diversion had a flexible, affordable entertainment option. This flexibility also made vaudeville a popular activity to attend before other musical and theater events in the city, which started at a set, later hour of the evening.



Beginning in the 1920's, the Majestic Theater began to diversify and offer dramatic theater productions, along with vaudeville. After World War II, the theater, renamed the Samuel S. Shubert Theater, was solely a stage for dramatic productions and musicals. The scene above is the *Beggar's Holiday*, which played at the Shubert in April 1947. The music was written by Duke Ellington and the orchestra directed by Billy Strayhorn.

When the Shubert Brothers assumed management in the 1920s, the Majestic Theater began to feature musical comedies, melodramas, and acts such as the Isadora Duncan Dancers. The three Shubert brothers—Sam, Lee and J.J.—founded a theater empire headquartered in New York. Members of a German immigrant family, the Shubert brothers grew up in Syracuse, where charismatic Sam began his theater career handing out playbills, eventually becoming a stage manager and then borrowing money from friends and business acquaintances to produce his first play in 1896. The success of that production allowed Sam to become manager of his own theater in Syracuse, where his shrewd and innovative business practices—like hiring cheaper vaudeville actors for legitimate theater productions—allowed him and his brothers to open their first theater in New York City. By 1905, the brothers had theater holdings in all the major U.S. cities, including the Garrick Theater in Chicago. Known for providing high-quality theater productions with top actors at half the price of other theaters, the business reached its apex in the 1920s. Rumored to be worth over \$400 million at that time, the Shuberts' acumen for the theatrical profession left a legacy of successful theaters and dramatic theater architecture and established how theater business is done to this day in the United States.

The Majestic was ever adapting to the changing tides of theater and the popularity of motion pictures. When "talking pictures" became the rage, vaudeville, catering to the same middle-class audience, lost much of its popularity. Under management of the Shubert Brothers, the Majestic stopped being an exclusively vaudeville stage and hosted other forms of theater in the 1920s, including such productions as the musical comedy *Irene* by James Montgomery (1921), a production of *Lysistrata* (1930) and even live modern dance performances.

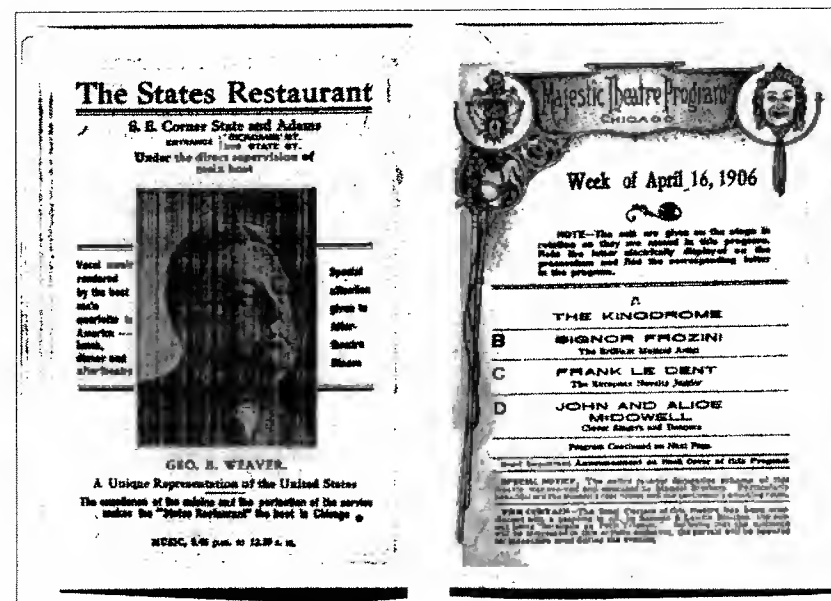


As a legitimate theater, the Majestic (renamed Shubert) Theater hosted many world renowned productions. As a major site for touring Broadway shows, such well known productions as *The Pajama Game*, *My Fair Lady*, *Hair* and *A Chorus Line* have played on its stage.



The theater's foray into musicals reflects Chicago's position as a leading center of theater in the 20th century. Benefiting from the cooling breezes off of Lake Michigan during the summer, Chicago was one of the only theater centers to turn a profit during the summer, regularly outnumbering New York productions by six to one. With their expensive production costs and loss of disposable income amongst its patrons, live theater suffered greatly during the Great Depression. During this time many live theaters converted to movie theaters or were closed.

Dark from 1934 to 1946 due to this economic downturn, the Majestic reopened as the renamed Sam S. Shubert Theater in September 1946. Named in honor of the Shubert brother who had established the vital foundations of the Shubert empire and had subsequently died at the early age of twenty-nine in 1905, this newly named theater was one of several across the country to bear his name. The reopened theater became an active part of the postwar theater revival of dramatic entertainment. The new postwar economy encouraged many new theater productions, often with movie actors working with theater actors. *Laffing Room Only*, the theater's opening production in 1946, featured comedy team Olsen and Johnson, who had recently filmed two pictures for Universal. Other prominent theater productions in the 1940s and 1950s included *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Brigadoon*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *South Pacific*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Pal Joey*, *Oklahoma*, *The King and I*, *The Pajama Game*, *My Fair Lady*, and *The Music Man*. These were presented in a newly refurbished and redecorated theater with an updated marquee, though the original interiors were preserved.



A 1906 program excerpt from the Majestic Theater. As a vaudeville theater, the Majestic hosted entertainers ranging from magicians and acrobats to famous dramatic players of the day, like Sarah Bernhardt. A film shown of Thomas Edison's newly invented kinodrome was the only constant player in the theater.

## LATER HISTORY

Due to the popularity of the motion picture, live theater suffered again from a lack of popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. The Chicago theater community increasingly was centered in "Off-Loop" theaters—small, experimental theaters on the City's Near North Side—and large theater productions in Loop theaters became less frequent. In the 1970s the Majestic was the only live theater operating in the downtown area, as the popularity of large Broadway-style stage productions dwindled. In the 1970s the theater presented popular musicals such as *Promises, Promises*; *No No Nanette*, *A Little Night Music*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The Wiz*, and *Annie*. In 1977 the Shubert opened *Shine it On* starring Liza Minelli. The theater kicked off the 1980s with a production of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, and continued with *Evita*, several reprises of *A Chorus Line*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *42nd Street*, and *Cats*, as well as other types of theater such as *Othello*, *The Odd Couple*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe*, and *Penn and Teller*. Finally, the theater went dark in late 1989.

In the early 1990s as Chicago's Loop began to revitalize, the theater scene experienced another renaissance, and the downtown theater district became an active one yet again. In 1991 the Nederlander Organization, another influential New York-based theatrical organization, bought the Majestic Building and Theater and took advantage of the well-designed theater's capacity to handle a wide variety of dramatic productions. The theater has since become a popular venue for major touring productions of Broadway hits as well as hosting a wealth of local theater productions.

Under Nederlander's management, the theater reopened in November 1991 with a production of *Tru*, and went on to present varied types of productions and concerts, including *A Few Good Men*, *An Evening with Peter Ustinov*, *Mandy Patinkin*, *Grover Washington*, *Defending the Caveman*, *Master Class*, the Joffrey Ballet, and musicals such as *Camelot*, *La Cage Aux Folles*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Hello Dolly*, *Stomp*, and *Grease*. In these years, the theater has hosted pre-Broadway openings of *The Goodbye Girl* (1992), *Victor/Victoria* (1995), the Tony-Award winning *Sweet Smell of Success* (2001) and Billy Joel's *Movin' Out* (2003). It has featured virtually every popular Broadway hit for Chicago's audiences, and continues to do so under the banner of Nederlander's Broadway in Chicago.

The Majestic Building and Theater remains an important cultural and architectural anchor for the Loop, with its presentation of quality theater in an opulent and unique historic setting. The building has been listed as a significant building within the Loop Retail National Register Historic District, and was ranked as "orange" in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey. It is described in several publications, including the *AIA Guide to Chicago* and a standard work on Chicago's skyscrapers, *The Sky's the Limit*.

## CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sec. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to recommend landmark designation for a building, structure, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Majestic Building and Theater be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

### Criterion 1: Critical Part of City's Heritage

*Its value as an example of the architectural, economic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

- The Majestic Building and Theater is significant in Chicago's theater history for its century-long presentation of theatrical entertainments, including vaudeville, musicals, and plays.
- In the history of vaudeville, the Majestic Theater was significant for bringing quality entertainment to middle-class Chicago audiences.
- The Majestic Theater was an important venue in Chicago for the transition from vaudeville to legitimate theater in the 1920s and 1930s.
- Following World War II, the renamed Shubert Theater played a key role in the survival and revival of legitimate theater in the Chicago Loop.

### Criterion 4: Important Architecture

*Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.*

- The Majestic Building and Theater is a significant and handsome early 20th-century terra-cotta clad skyscraper.
- The Majestic Building and Theater is a rare example of the French Renaissance style in Chicago, combining classical elements with a Sullivanesque influence.

- The Majestic Building and Theater displays exceptional craftsmanship in both the extensive use of terra-cotta ornament on the exterior and the lavish marble, bronze and gilded detailing of the interior theater spaces.
- The Majestic Building and Theater is an early extant example of a mixed-use theater building, combining a lavish auditorium with retail and office space.
- The theater and lobby are lavishly detailed interior spaces handsomely ornamented in the classical style.
- The Majestic Building and Theater is considered to be the finest example of the work of Chicago architect Edmund R. Krause and influenced the theater design of George Rapp, who worked as the designer of the theater while and assistant to Krause.

## Integrity Criterion

*The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic, community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.*

The Majestic Building and Theater retains a very high degree of integrity, with most of the distinguishing features of both the office building and theater remaining, including the office building's exterior form and silhouette, elaborate white terra-cotta sheathing and French Renaissance-style ornament. In the interior, the elaborate decorative features of the theater auditorium and related public spaces have been preserved.

Alterations to the exterior include the replacement of the terra cotta cornice above the second story with glazed brick that matches that of secondary elevations. While much of the original marquee structure and some of its ornament have survived, the theater signage design has been altered several times, both in the 1920s and 1940s. The original theater loggia, open to the street and extending two stories in height, was enclosed with new entry doors and a lowered ceiling probably in the 1940s, but the original second-story fluted columns with compound capitals and coffered ceiling still exist above the current ceiling, and plans exist to uncover it. The office, retail and theater entry assemblies have all been changed, most recently in the 1980s. On the east elevation, the original entry for African-American patrons is extant, though the stairs have been partially closed off in the interior where it leads up to the gallery.

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In the interior, the alterations to the vestibule and lobby areas occurred more than fifty years ago, between the completion of the building in 1906 and the theater's reopening in 1946. The earliest alterations modified the interior wall and foyer stair finishes from wood-trimmed Victorian design to much more elaborate classically-inspired detail that was sympathetic to the French-Renaissance design of the exterior. Of the original and early finishes, the bronze openings into the vestibule and lobby remain, along with bronze grilles, moldings and other trim. The beautiful, intricately patterned marble mosaic floors have been preserved in the loggia, vestibule and lobby. The marble walls, trim, stairs and wainscots also remain in all the interior spaces, as do the decorative cornice moldings of the lobby ceilings and the two-story coved, bracketed ceiling. The marble stairs descending to the French Rococo-style fireplace mantel and the ladies' lounge with its original, intact wainscots, cornices and ceiling decorations have all been preserved. As mentioned, the nautical-themed men's lounge across the hall has suffered more extensive alterations. The theater auditorium and main staircase have also retained excellent integrity, with their historic spatial arrangements and elaborate decorative trim, though the original gilding has been painted. The seating in the auditorium has changed, increasing slightly the number of seats.

The entrance lobby to the office tower has had new finishes, with painted drywall replacing the original marble walls, and the office floors have been remodeled over the years to accommodate different tenants. The retail space between the auditorium and the office entry has also been altered over the years, with new storefronts and interior space.

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## **SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark. Based on its preliminary evaluation of the Majestic Building and Theater, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- all exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building;
- the historic theater auditorium in its entirety; and
- portions of the vestibule, lobby and staircases.



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## Collections

Chicago Historical Society  
*Majestic Theater Collection, Shubert Theater Collection*

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